

The Nobles · Book Four



The Mage in the Iron Mask

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Forgotten Realms

The Nobles: The Mage in the Iron Mask

Prologue

Donal Loomis was a dwarfish gnome of a man, which is not to say that he claimed any blood lineage to either the dwarves or the gnomes but rather that his overall appearance, unfortunately, seemed to emulate the least favorable attributes of both races. With his bulbous features, stunted stature, and obese waistline, he was easily considered an unsightly wart on the face of humankind.

The jagged facial scars that decorated his hairless head, unsightly reminders of the painful removal of tell-tale tattoos, did not help the ugliness of his physical appearance. Had he not retired to "the Retreat" he would have been a focal point for ridicule and persecution almost anywhere he went.

The Retreat, as the members called it, was originally a place of study, refuge, and retirement for those who wished to devote their lives to the study of mage-craft and other magical arts. Scholarship alone, however, ceased to be enough of a reason for being or means of survival in the dour political climes of the Moonsea region, and the elder wizards who founded the Retreat many years ago decided that it had become necessary to widen their membership to certain other members of society who might help to subsidize their institution through financial endowments, political protection (whether by favors, military aid, or just good old-fashioned blackmail), or diplomatic influence. As a result, the institute of learning and refuge also became a place of sanctuary for political outcasts whose assets or knowledge could benefit their foundation, spies from the south or the west en route to the east or vice versa (Harpers were usually particularly welcome temporary guests whose incurred debts were always paid in a timely and generous manner); or just a convenient and permanent hiding place for offspring born on the wrong side of the blanket by royals

or soon to be royals whose legitimate heirs had reason to worry about potential rivals.

As long as the accounts were met, no questions were asked, nor information given out. As a result, numerous members of the peculiar institution who had come to accept their lives of study had no knowledge of their parentage or lineage, and possessed memories solely of their lives within the monastic walls, nor did they desire such information nor opportunities for adventure. Loyola Ignato, one of the Retreat's founders and, according to legend, a mage of some note, had prided himself on his abilities to indoctrinate the young and inexperienced into the ways of life in the monastery. He was known to boast that if you gave him a youth between the ages of two and twenty, the Retreat would have him for life, and many nobles were more than willing to accommodate him. Without exception the Retreat had never lost an initiate to temporal temptations that lie beyond the monastic walls.

Donal, however, was not one of these members for he had actually chosen the sanctuary of the Retreat (seeing few alternatives) for himself, and, furthermore, was more than partially acquainted with his own lineage and parentage, no matter how hard he tried to forget.

The self-labeled wart of humankind rubbed the scars that adorned his bald and wrinkled pate. I wore my tattoos with pride, he thought to himself, if I regret anything it is their removal. With them, I had respect, power, and prestige despite my godsforsaken appearance.

Donal sighed.

And with them, I was soon a marked man, he continued in his reflection. Such is the case when one finds oneself on the wrong side of a revolution, and Szass Tam was one lich who definitely didn't forgive and forget.

Donal had had his telltale tattoos painfully burnt off his facial skin, and had applied for sanctuary at the Retreat, supplementing the mercy and pity that the elders felt toward him with promises of devotion and the sharing of

numerous secrets of conjuration. To them, he was just another poor wizard who had fallen victim to hard times and misfortune, and so he was accepted and put to work to earn his keep.

Originally the former Red Wizard had had illusions of safety in his anonymity, and dreamt of secreting a small fortune by which he could leave the Retreat and live out his days in a secret location at a higher degree of comfort, but these hopes were soon dashed when Nathor, a fellow conspirator from that ill-fated revolution had also turned up at the steps of the Retreat.

Donal still remembered the Thayan refugee's rant to the elders trying to make them understand his dire straits.

"Have you gazed upon the Runes of Chaos, beheld the thing which sits upon Thakorsil's Seat, held the Death Moon Orb in your trembling hands, wielded Nyskar's Nightblades, entered the Devouring Portal and walked the Paths of the Doomed, or sat at the left hand of Szass Tam during the Ritual of Twin Burning?"

The others had felt pity toward him, and suggested that he be taken in until he could be handed over to the authorities as a madman in need of incarceration. Donal knew differently.

"I have done all these things," Nathor had confessed, "and each day I pray for forgiveness, and each night at sunset I pray for deliverance from the evils that stalk me. I pray, but I fear that no gods will listen."

Donal still remembered the chill that went through him when their eyes met. From that point on, the refugee remained silent, almost as if he had gone into a fear-induced catatonic state.

The emissaries from the asylum were due to arrive in four days.

Nathor disappeared after three days, and was never heard from again.

Since that day, Donal had been perplexed. An optimistic

individual with a touch of cruelty might have chuckled over the situation. Perhaps Nathor had recognized him and leaped to the conclusion that he was a spy from Thay who had been sent after him. Little did the poor fool realize that he too was a wizard in hiding with probably an even higher price on his head.

Though Donal was cruel enough to laugh at the unfortunate and mistaken Nathor (an opportunity which the much-maligned and trod-upon self-proclaimed wart on the face of Faerun would have been more than eager to seize upon), he was far from optimistic.

Donal was a realist and realized that his days of anonymity at the Retreat were numbered, and he quickly seized upon an opportunity to remove the danger that he knew would quickly be coming from the East, and perhaps make plans for a more comfortable future.

An opportunity soon presented itself when Donal had to take his turn as an elder of the Retreat and make the half-day journey into Mulmaster to deliver the monthly tithe. (Only elders were allowed to venture from the Retreat, as the more youthful interns were prone to distractions that might persuade them to forsake the life of scholarly pursuits, and at his eighty-plus years, Donal more than qualified as an elder).

As per usual, Donal tried to make his journey as swift and as inconspicuous as possible. His progress, however, was held up by one of the numerous connubial festivals that was celebrated by the thrice-yearly reunion of the High Blade and his bride from the Far East, and Donal's most direct path out of town was blocked by a parade in their honor.

Donal at the time did not expect to feel honored or blessed by actually seeing the city's nobility, but rather just waited impatiently to resume his journey. A chance view of the High Blade himself, however, quickly changed his mind, and from that point on devious wheels of planning and deceitfulness began to turn with a plan that would grant him safety and

security for the rest of his days.

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Donal cursed the chill of the night air, as he checked the hiding place for the pack that held all of his worldly possessions. Everything was in order, and he hoped that the escort would arrive promptly. It had not been easy to manipulate the schedule so that the young mage-in-training, Rassendyll, would follow him on watch duty, nor had he been able to make all of the necessary other preparations without alerting any of the Retreat's brethren to his machinations and preoccupations.

The drug was already in the jug of ale that the watch was allowed to partake of to ward off some of the night's chill, and Donal had made sure that Rassendyll's meal had been well salted earlier that evening. Once he had been relieved of duty, Donal would join his pack in hiding, and wait for his successor on guard duty to nod off by the sleep draught, at which point he would be free to open the gate, and meet his expected escort.

Donal had just returned to his place at the gate, when an eager young wizard crept up behind him.

"Boo," the young mage said, startling the older wizard. "Hope I'm not late."

Donal closed his eyes, and bit his tongue to hold back a curse or incantation of rebuke for the young wizard. After less than a moment's hesitation, he turned around, and warmly confronted the young wizard who would prove to be the means of his deliverance unto safety and prosperity.

"My dear Rassendyll," Donal fawned, "you gave me such a fright."

"Sorry, magister," the younger wizard replied, obviously repentant for his previous action, "but I have also shown up early for my watch."

"How thoughtful of you," Donal replied, hoping that he had succeeded in removing all traces of sarcasm from his words despite the intent that existed in abundance within.

"It's all right," Rassendyll replied, "I couldn't sleep anyway. My mouth has been exceptionally dry since evening meal, and no matter how many trips I've made to the well, my throat still remains parched."

A little bit of salt and some Thayan spices usually have that effect on you, Donal replied in his thoughts, and then said out loud. "Why don't you try a sip of ale? I seem to recall a land of miners where all forms of spirited beverages were outlawed except for ale, and do you know why?"

"No, magister," the younger wizard replied, fearing that he had just re-entered some imaginary classroom in the mind of the older wizard whose kindest of nicknames was "doddering Donal."

"Because it was the only thing that would slake their thirst after a dusty day in the mines, that's why," Donal replied, then added, "so drink up."

"Care to join me?" the younger wizard offered, jug already in hand.

"I think not," Donal replied, then adding to avoid all suspicions, "I am heading to bed, and, at my age, beverages have a way of making themselves the most temporary and inconsiderate of houseguests."

"Come again magister?"

"They like to come and go as they please, and quite often at that," Donal replied with a chuckle.

"Enjoy your rest."

"And you yours," Donal replied heading back to his cell.

"And you yours."

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When Donal had passed the corner of the inner hall and was thus obscured from the watchful eyes of the younger wizard, he quickly took to the shadows and secreted himself in his hiding spot, out of sight, but well within earshot. In no time at all, he heard the sound of his future salvation: Rassendyll's snoring, and the whistle of a lark.

The lark is one of Faerun's most common birds of the morn,

and since it was still well into the middle of the night, Donal quickly recognized the signal from the Thayan agents on the other side of the gate. He pursed his lips together, returned the signal, and let them in.

"He is over here," Donal instructed, not wasting time with introductions. "Quickly bind his hands behind his back with silken cords."

The shadowriders quickly complied; their telltale beards, and dirty and greasy manes quickly revealed their identities to the older wizard.

Mercenaries, he thought. Dirty hands for dirty work.

"You should also gag him," Donal instructed with great authority, now that he knew that they were merely hired help, "and perhaps put a sack over his head as well."

They once again quickly complied, and hoisted the dead weight that was Rassendyll up onto the back of a horse, and bound him to the saddle.

"Where is my mount?" Donal insisted, pausing only to pick up his pack. "We mustn't keep the Tharchioness waiting."

The tallest of the mercenaries, who had remained mounted and in the shadows all during the abduction of the young wizard, stepped down from his steed as if to offer it to the self-described wart on the face of Faerun.

"You are right," he replied drawing closer to Donal, "we mustn't keep the Tharchioness waiting."

As he drew closer, Donal began to make out the emblematic tattoos that adorned the tall one's cheeks, and the wig that had fallen off his pate and was now resting in the cowl that drooped behind his robe.

Donal dropped his pack, and opened his mouth as if to cry out.

"She sends her regards," the tall one said, quickly removing a crystal wand from the folds of his robe, and thrusting it into the portly wizard's abdomen, then ripping it upward until it had succeeded in splitting the lower half of the old wizard's heart, and then adding, "but she regrets that you

will not be joining us. She has this thing about traitors to the cause of Szass Tam, and specifically not giving them a second chance to betray us."

The tall one regained his mount in as little time as it took for Donal to fall to the ground.

As the shadowriders disappeared into the darkness, their hoofbeats diminishing in the distance, Donal quietly died with a faint trace of a smile on his cruelly misshapen lips, his final thought acquiescing to the insight of the Tharchioness, followed by a chuckle at a secret joke, and a last groan of pain that delivered him unto his expected damnation.

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Rassendyll came to in less than an hour, his body aching from the jostling caused by the steed he was bound to, and the awkward positioning of his bound body upon it. He tried to cry out, but couldn't because of the horse's bit that had been fastened to his face as if he were some uncooperative plow horse in need of direction. Had his head not been covered with a sack, he would have realized that it was still the middle of the night. As it was, the only sense left to him for observation was his hearing, and as the shadowriders rode in silence, it too didn't seem to be of much help . . . until, quite unexpectedly, his steed stopped in unison with the rest of the party, and a commotion seemed to break out. "Who goes there? Show yourselves," the young wizard thought he heard through the muffling effect of the sack. This was followed by a screech of horses, several clashes of steel, and more than a few cries of pain, as a party of superior force soon overtook his abductors, and mercilessly slaughtered them.

Rassendyll could barely maintain his joy. He still had no idea why he had been abducted, nor how, nor where he was right now. The only thing he knew was that he was being rescued.

"Where is Donal?" he heard.

"Back at the Retreat. I killed the traitor."

"Thank you for saving me the trouble."

This was followed by one last shriek of pain, and one last whispered order.

"Take half of the company back to the Retreat, and kill everyone. No one must escape, and be sure to leave this behind."

Had the young wizard not been blinded by the sack that encompassed his head, he would have undoubtedly noticed the speaker (obviously the group's leader) handing his lieutenant a blood-stained crystal wand which Rassendyll, had he been conscious at the time, would have recognized as the weapon that had been used to kill the traitor Donal. As it was he saw nothing, and, petrified with fear after hearing the plans for slaughter, tried to maintain his wits in hopes that an opportunity for escape might present itself.

A thundering herd of hooves galloped off into the distance and before he knew it, Rassendyll was once again tossed around as the party he was now an unwilling member of raced onward into the night.

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Rassendyll lost all track of time as the riders raced the dawn to their destination. As the stallions slowed down to a trot, the young wizard thought he could distinguish from the cacophony of sounds that included the clapping of the horses' hooves and the verbal spurs of the riders, a change in the ground upon which they rode, the sound of a gate being raised, and a cock crowing in the distance. As the gate closed behind them, he felt the horse that bore him stop, and felt an eeriness at the peaceful silence that pervaded the early morn.

The stillness of the air gave way to the distinct odors of industry, smoke, sulfur, and fish.

They must have brought me to some city, the young wizard discerned, but where? Mulmaster? Hillsfar? If only I knew how long I had been unconscious.

A few footsteps and the sound of a blade being withdrawn from a scabbard struck terror into his heart.

Why did they take me all this way just to kill me? he thought, trying to make sense of his situation. Surely if they had intended on killing me they would have done so before now.

Concentrating deeply, as the magisters had shown him, he sought out with his mind the source of the sounds. In his mind's eye he saw a one-eyed soldier with long black hair standing right next to him, sword raised as if to strike. Fear took control of the young wizard, and as his mind's eye blinked, he felt himself try to scream, forgetting the restraining bit that was still safely lodged in his mouth.

He felt the breeze of a slash pass by his head, a moment of instability as if he had lost his balance, and then the rude concussion of meeting the cobble-stoned ground.

"Pick him up," he heard. "It wouldn't make much sense to have carried him all this way just to let him be trampled in the courtyard by the horse that bore him."

This was accompanied by a malevolent chorus of laughter, as rough hands wrangled him to his feet.

"I think he's awake," one voice said.

"Not for long," another replied.

Rassendyll tried to brace himself for the anticipated blow, felt a sharp pain to the back of his head the likes of which he never felt before, and was consumed by the darkness that had already blinded his other senses.

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A bucket of water to the face did the double duty of reviving him and drawing his attention to the fact that the sack had been removed from over his head. His entire body ached, his arms long wrenched from their sockets by the constraints of the silken bonds. He tried to move and stretch his cramped muscles, but found his freedom impaired by what seemed to be a massive wooden yoke and frame that anchored his limbs in a semi-sitting position that provided him with no room to relieve or relax his protesting limbs and also restrained his head from moving. He thought he could

discern a wooden collar that was acting as his neck yoke. The underside was tormenting his shoulders and collarbone with splinters, while the topside seemed cool and smooth as if it were lined with a metal plate. The bit had been removed from his mouth, but the tightness of the yoke further inhibited his attempts at crying out.

Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the light thrown by the torches that illuminated the chamber. His captors were behind him, and cast long and threatening shadows on the wall before him.

"Our esteemed guest is awake. Isn't the resemblance uncanny?" one of the shadows observed.

"Donal didn't lie. I guess even greedy liars and knaves occasionally tell the truth," the other replied, "but I guess we shouldn't ask our friends from Thay for their opinions on this subject."

"Are you awake?" the first inquired. "I should think that you would want to thank Sir Melker Rickman for rescuing you from those wretched mercenaries from Thay."

The source of the voice came around to Rassendyll's left, just out of sight. "I'm sorry that you have been treated so roughly, but one can't be too careful. You see, there are certain laws here in Mulmaster governing the comings and goings of you mage types, so certain precautions have to be taken. I'm sure that by now your wrists must be raw from the restraints that have kept you from using your hands since last night, and I must apologize. I have, however, taken steps to alleviate the problem. Send in the smith."

The young wizard saw the back of the other pass in front of him as he left to fetch the smith. He returned almost immediately, and this time Rassendyll was able to discern that this one-eyed soldier with long black hair had been the same person who had led the party that had stolen him from his original abductors. He was accompanied by a burly wizard who bore two large metal plates with him, as well as a hammer and a pouch that jangled as he moved. The

soldier seemed to lead the burly wizard, and the reason became obvious when he stopped in front of the yoke and frame that restrained Rassendyll.

The burly wizard was as blind as a bat, his eye sockets still bearing the singe marks from where some flaming coals had been put to rest for some, what must have been interminable, period of suffering for Ao knows what reason.

"You know why you are here," the voice from behind commanded. "Begin!"

The burly wizard replied with a garbled noise of assent, for his tongue had been burnt out as well during the same period of excruciating torture, and began to place the two metal plates into slots in the yoke around the young wizard's neck, one directly behind his head, and one in front.

Once they were perfectly balanced in place, the burly wizard began to run his hands over the metal surfaces, mouthing incantations as he worked. Slowly the metal began to heat up, and soften. With hands that had forged numerous talismans and weapons of enchantment, the wizard smith began to mold the two plates to fit the contours of the young man's head.

At first, Rassendyll felt a slight sensation of warmth against his cheeks, which quickly became a torturous burn followed by a stifling oppression as the metal closed over his mouth and nose, preventing him from breathing. Before he could cry out or choke, his nostrils and mouth were assailed by the muscular fingers of the burly wizard smith as he poked holes through the metal, molding and smoothing the edges so that they just barely intruded into his breathing apertures. He followed in the same suit with the eye slits whose placement was slightly skewed by the young wizard who kept his own orbs of vision shut tight in an effort to prevent himself from suffering the same fate that had befallen the smith.

When the two halves of metal were in place around the young wizard's head, the wizard smith said aloud a new

incantation, flexing his fingers in the air with various and sundry subtle motions.

Once again Rassendyll felt the metal pressing up against his cheeks and the back of his head. Then he felt his skin begin to itch around his neck and scalp as if a thousand chiggers had begun to take their bloodsucking positions along the surface of the skin. He next heard the scrape of four bolts being placed in slots that connected the front piece to the back, which was immediately followed by a cacophony of clangs as if he had been strapped to the belfry back at the Retreat during the noonday chimes.

Even after the blows of the hammer had stopped, the ringing in his head continued, only gradually dissipating over time.

"Are you sure the mask has adhered to his skull?" the soldier demanded.

The wizard smith grunted in assent, running his hand across the back of the tortured Rassendyll's head, and around his neck as if to say "here, and here."

"Good!" said the voice from behind. "Call the guards."

The soldier left once again, and returned with three of Mulmaster's most trusted and ruthless soldiers of the company known as the Hawks.

"Unbind him!" the voice ordered.

Rassendyll went limp as the Hawks began to extricate him from the yoke and frame. The itching and gnawing of the skin that had been adhered to the metal was slowly retarding to a mild annoyance that paled in comparison to the soreness that his limbs felt from being bound. As this was alleviated by the Hawks, a new annoyance came to torture him.

The voice, he thought, it sounds so familiar. Is it possible I have been tortured by someone I know?

Once removed from the frame, the young wizard straightened and flexed his appendages to return circulation to the outermost limits. Control soon returned to his hands

and fingers, as he quickly formulated a plan for fighting back in the manner he had been taught by his magisters at the Retreat.

The wizard smith is blind, so if I act quickly enough, I might be able to cast a spell that will overpower my captors before they have time to react.

Almost instantaneously, Rassendyll brought his now unbound hands into action, flexing them in readiness for one of the numerous attack spells he had been taught. Clearing his now unbound throat he readied himself for the incantation that he sought from the files of his mind.

Fear seized him. He could not remember any of the spells or incantations! It was as if his entire education had been erased.

"As I mentioned before," the voice instructed with a certain degree of cruel calmness, "we have certain ways of handling mage types like yourself, here in Mulmaster. This lovely mask that conceals your oh-so-attractive features also deadens all of your magical abilities. You have to admit that it is slightly more comfortable than being bound and gagged all the time. Guards!"

The Hawks immediately grabbed him, one on each side. The voice came up behind him again, delicately gauntleted hands feeling the edges of the two halves of the metal mask. "Fine craftsmanship," the voice observed. "Form-fitting, yet feature obscuring. Too bad you didn't allow much room for his beard to grow. Eventually it will probably choke him, but by that time I am sure I will have no further use for him. Guards, take him away."

Rassendyll wrenched himself away from the guards to confront his oppressor. The eye-slits in the mask necessitated that he only view objects directly in front of him. Maneuvering himself into position, he faced his antagonist dead on, and fainted dead away, for he realized that he was confronting a man whose features were identical to his own.

"Throw him into our deepest dungeon," the High Blade ordered. "The wing in which we house the other madmen, vagrants, and detritus of society."

The Hawks complied.

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Rassendyll was tossed into a damp cell whose light was cast from a torch down the hall, its illumination barely creeping in through the guards' peep hole and the slot through which the slop that was considered food would be passed.

The weight of the mask bore heavily on his neck and shoulders, throwing him off-balance and dampening all of his perceptions. His body hurt, and he was racked with questions about his fate.

Clearing his throat, he cried out in torment and confusion, "Why? Why? Why?"

A lone voice answered him from one of the cells down the hall. It said gruffly, with a basso bellow reminiscent of a thespian or an opera star, "Will you keep it down? An actor needs his sleep."

PART ONE

The Prisoner, the Thespian, & the Traveler

1

A Friend in Need

On a Mulmaster city street:

"Oh thank you, Mister Volo," the pudgy thespian Passepout exclaimed, his bulgy flesh bouncing beneath his tunic as he tried to put as much distance as possible between himself and his previous night's lodging, the prison known as Southroad Keep. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along to bail me out."

"Think nothing of it, old friend," Volothamp Geddarm replied to his former bond servant, pausing only a moment to adjust the beret atop his curly scalp before adding, "and I thought I had cured you of that Mister Volo stuff."

"No," Passepout corrected. "You cured me of calling you Master Volo. The title of 'mister' is the least form of respect I

deign to use for my savior and salvation."

"Again," the impeccably dressed master traveler of Faerun (if not all Toril) instructed, "think nothing of it."

"But you don't understand, Mist. . . uh, Volo," the thespian insisted. "It was horrible being locked up in a dungeon cell alongside madmen, vagrants, and the other detritus of society."

"Believe me," Volo countered, "there is far worse company you might have been keeping in Southroad Keep's subterranean dungeon, and not all of them are prisoners either."

"It was horrible, dehumanizing, and torturous."

"How long had you been incarcerated?" the master traveler inquired.

"Overnight," the pudgy thespian answered in righteous indignation, "and I didn't get a wink of sleep. An actor needs his sleep, you know."

"So I've heard."

"Of course," Passepout continued to rant. "The cell was hard and damp, the food was low-grade slop."

"How terrible for you," Volo concurred half-heartedly, occasionally fingering his well-groomed beard with the hand that he had free from tending the traveler's pack that bounced as he strode.

"It was," the actor agreed, missing the sarcasm that was conveyed by the master traveler's mischievous grin. "And if that wasn't bad enough, there was this madman bemoaning his incarceration all night, and he was accompanied by a horrible clanging as if someone were beating his cell walls with a coal bucket."

"The nerve of that poor soul."

"Indeed," the thespian continued. "I am quite sure that this incident has scarred me for life."

Volo looked around at the dark and smoke-filled streets of what had been nicknamed the City of Danger, put his arm around his boon companion, and tried to put the fellow's

one-night incarceration into proper perspective.

"Surely, the legendary son of Catinflas and Idle, scourge of the Sword Coast, expert ballplayer and star goalie of Maztica, and circumnavigator of all Toril; not to mention master thespian, and sponsored actor and artist of the House of Bernd of Cormyr, will be able to put this behind him," the master traveler encouraged, trying not to be too sarcastic in his tone.

"Of course you are right," Passepout conceded. "It would take more than one torturous night's incarceration to scar me for life."

"Indeed," Volo agreed, then changed the subject, asking, "by the way, how are things with your position in the Bernd family household?"

Passepout looked sheepishly at his traveling companion, mentor of the road, and savior many times over, and confessed. "I am afraid that I am no longer in the Bernd family's employ."

"What happened?"

"I didn't do anything wrong, really."

"Well surely Master Bernd is a fair man, and his son Curtis is quite fond of you. I'm sure either of them would have stood by you."

"Curtis was away on his honeymoon with Shurleen," the thespian explained, slightly wistful about the wedding of the woman whom he had at one time thought to be the love of his life, "and my problem wasn't with Master Bernd, but rather with the authorities in Cormyr itself."

"What did you do now?"

"Well, remember Sparky and Minx, the Bernd family cats?"

"Of course," Volo replied, "two nobler felines I've never met."

"Indeed," the thespian explained, "but there was a certain maid that I had taken a fancy to. Her name was Marissa, and she was quite pretty."

"Of course."

"Well," the portly thespian continued, "Marissa complained

about the additional work that she had to do cleaning up after them, and mentioned her concern that the two felines might have kittens, and thus increase her workload, resulting in less time for me."

"So?"

"So I did what we always used to do back in Baldur's Gate."

"Which was?"

"I had them spayed."

Volo fingered his beard, and commented, "It is a very serious crime—in all of Cormyr—to interfere with the reproductive capabilities of a feline."

"As I soon learned," the hapless thespian replied. "The maid threatened to tell the authorities of my deed unless I vacated the premises forthwith, and so I did. It turned out that a certain young stable hand that she fancied, thought himself an actor, and it was all just an elaborate scheme to put me in the doghouse, and him in the main house. If you know what I mean."

Volo shook his head in gentle amusement, and urged his companion on. "So what then?"

"The maid was quite insistent about going to the authorities, so I figured it would probably be prudent of me not to wait for Master Bernd's return. So I left a note of apology and took to the road, to experience life in the theater known as Faerun, once again."

"This way," Volo interrupted, indicating that it was time for them to turn the corner. "I've just checked in to the Traveler's Cloak Inn." The great traveler paused for a moment, scratched his chin, and added inquisitively, "But somehow you knew that, or else how would you have known to leave a message for me about your predicament. How did you know that I would be staying there?"

The thespian beamed proudly, and answered, "One thing I certainly learned from our trip was that the legendary Volothamp Geddarm always travels in style, and only favors the most noble of establishments with his presence."

The greatest traveler of Faerun shook his head in gentle amusement, and conceded, "But of course. And the Traveler's Cloak Inn is indeed the best place in Mulmaster. At fifteen gold pieces a night, it better be. But this still doesn't explain how you knew that I would be in Mulmaster."

"Well," the portly actor explained, his voice dropping markedly as a pair of soldiers passed them going in the opposite direction along the avenue, "while I was enjoying the free and easy life on the road, I came across a leaflet that mentioned that a local bookseller was having a reception for a cookbook author who was on tour, and that the reception was being sponsored by the firm of Tyme Waterdeep, Limited, who I remembered as your publisher. Since it was a cookbook author, I naturally figured that there would be plenty of food there, so I decided to crash."

"Crash?"

"Attend without an invitation."

"Oh," Volo replied, "and they just let you in?"

"Well, not until I mentioned your name, of course."

"Of course."

"The food wasn't very good anyway, low-fat fungus flambe, and such, but I ran into a guy named Pig who claimed he knew you."

"Imagine that," Volo mused.

"Now call me suspicious, but I am not inclined to take a person at their word, particularly when they make claims of greatness."

"Like knowing Volothamp Geddarm?"

"Of course," Passepout asserted. "No telling what a rogue might claim these days."

"No one would know better than you."

"Of course," the actor conceded. "Anyway, he claimed that you and he had made a journey through the Underdark together, and that that trip had been the inspiration for the book. When I asked him where you were, he said that you were probably working on your guide to the Moonsea, and

so, voila, we make contact."

Volo chuckled to himself. Imagine, he thought, my two most reluctant traveling companions running into each other. I can't wait to hear Percival Woodehaus's version of the story. He then said aloud to his friend, "Well its just lucky for you that Mulmaster was my next stop. Originally it wasn't, and I wouldn't have gotten here for a month or more."

"I shudder to think of it," the portly thespian replied. "More than a night in that hellhole would surely have been the death of me."

"What did they arrest you for anyway?"

"Acting, without an official permit."

Volo nodded in agreement, and said, "And of course in order to get the official permit, you would have had to pay the theater tax, which, of course, you couldn't afford."

"Exactly."

"Sometimes I think that Mulmaster should be called the City of Taxes instead of the City of Danger," the great traveler declared, a bit too loudly for his paranoid companion who was overly conscious of the excessive number of city guards that seemed to be out on the streets. Volo, noticing the uneasiness of Passepout, quickly changed the subject.

Turning his attention back to his boon companion he said, "Enough of this idle chatter. On to the matter at hand. The Traveler's Cloak Inn is two doors away, and I have taken the liberty of changing my reservation from a single to two adjoining rooms. A few hours' rest, and you will be ripe and ready for some festing tonight. We can talk over old times, have some new times, and make plans for future times, for tomorrow I must leave."

"You think of everything Mist . . . uh, Volo. But why must you leave so soon?"

"Oh, I'll be back," the traveler answered. "I'll probably even keep the rooms on reserve until I return. You can, of course, avail yourself of their use in my absence."

"Wonderful!"

Volo smiled at once again hearing his friend's favorite expression, and ushered Passepout into the best inn in town.

* * * * *

Around Mulmaster,
the Tower of Arcane Might,
and at the Traveler's Cloak Inn:

While the master traveler made arrangements for the next few days of his research, the pudgy thespian spent most of the afternoon sleeping in the most comfortable bed that he had had the honor of lying in since he left the luxuries of the Bernd estate many months ago. Volo's research included stopping by the local taverns, inns, and festhalls to gain a few recommendations for accommodations. He was very careful not to reveal his true identity everywhere, as some of the establishments would later be graced with an incognito visitation, by him, for purposes of giving them a fair evaluation for their inclusion in his upcoming Volo's Guide to the Moonsea.

Volo also made it a point of checking in at the legendary Tower of Arcane Might, the guild hall for the Brotherhood of the Cloak. Volo had earlier received honorary "Cloak" status from the Senior Cloak Thurndan Tallwand in exchange for the noted author's silence concerning the source of various secret entries in his legendarily suppressed work Volo's Guide to All Things Magical. By checking in informally as an honorary Cloak, the master traveler hoped to avoid future problems around Mulmaster with its strict rules on magic use, while also maintaining a low profile that would enable him to come and go as inconspicuously as possible with the rigid regimens of the often-called City of Danger.

As expected, Tallwand was unavailable, at least according to his secretary.

"I am sorry," said the officious wizard who acted as Tallwand's secretary. "The Senior Cloak is very busy, and can not see you today."

"That's too bad," Volo, the ever courteous traveler, replied,

"but I really did want to say hello."

"I am afraid that is not possible," the secretary replied, and returned to the work that was on his desk.

Volo stood for a moment and fingered his beard, the wheels of thought whirring in his head. He suspected that Tallwand was indeed eavesdropping on his conversation with his wizardly lackey. He just wanted to see him for a moment. He decided it was time to fight dirty.

In the few moments that Volo took for contemplation and cogitation, an older wizard had entered the Senior Cloak's antechamber. He was a sour old coot who seemed very impressed with himself. No doubt he was older and stonier than the Tower of Arcane Might itself.

"Ah, Mage McKern, you are here for your appointment," the lackey recognized. "Let me just check with the Senior Cloak. I am sure he will be with you momentarily."

Volo sighed loudly and said aloud, "I guess I will have to have the article published without giving Thurndan a chance to review it." The master traveler sighed again, and started to head to the door.

The Senior Cloak, who was indeed eavesdropping on the goings-on, immediately burst through the door. His face was a mask of enthusiasm and surprise desperately trying to hide a look of embarrassment and fear over what he had just heard.

"Volo!" he hailed. "What a surprise! Come right in."

The master traveler reversed his steps and said, "I didn't want to disturb you. I am sure you are very busy, and . . ."

"Not at all," Thurndan replied, putting his arm around the shoulders of the mischievous author and ushering him into his office, pausing quickly to turn to his secretary and whisper, "Reschedule whatever you have to."

As he crossed the threshold the master traveler heard the secretary saying, "I am sorry Mage McKern, perhaps we can reschedule for next month...."

* * * * *

Volo's meeting with Tallwand was quite short. The master traveler made up an article that he hoped the Senior Cloak might take a look at. The Senior Cloak quickly assented, relieved that it had nothing to do with his earlier transgression that had made its way into the notorious All Things Magical, and then set about getting rid of the master traveler as fast as possible.

Volo, satisfied that no one would now be able to dispute that he had indeed checked in at the Tower of Arcane Might and equally eager to be on his way, verbally recognized the Senior Cloak's busy schedule and agreed to hurry along, promising to return at some later date when they would both have some time to swap stories and spells.

The master traveler was quite full of himself as he passed the secretary who had tried to bar his way. Volo chuckled, realizing that the lackey was probably staring daggers at him. That will teach him to try to get in the way of the master traveler of all Toril, Volo thought proudly.

Still preoccupied with his own elan and facility, Volo didn't even notice accidentally bumping into the sour old mage whose appointment he had usurped. Had he done so he probably would have apologized. Instead he continued on his oblivious path, not even hearing the vitriolic curses that were being spewed behind his back.

* * * * *

Upon returning to the Traveler's Cloak Inn, he was immediately greeted in the dining hall by the now refreshed Passepout, whose pleasant afternoon nap had added fuel to his already voracious appetite.

"Volo!" Passepout yelled. "Over here!"

I must remember to go alone on my visitations that require a low profile, the master traveler reminded himself, and then joined his friend at the opulently laid table.

"Dela darling," the portly thespian called to the barmaid, "Please set a place for my friend here, and bring more food. He might be hungry." Turning his attention to the recently

seated Volo, he whispered, "I think she likes me. I have a way with barmaids."

"I remember," the master traveler replied. "You were always quite the ladies' man."

Dela quickly set a place for Volo, and was about to return to the bar when Passepout gave her a friendly pat on the rump, and said, "Very nice, my sweet. Play your cards right, and I'll put in a good word for you with the management."

Dela gave Volo a long-suffering look, and said, "You sure he's a friend of yours, Mr. Geddarm?"

"Afraid so," the master traveler replied.

"Well, please advise him to keep his hands to himself," she instructed, and regained her place at the bar.

Volo looked to his friend, and said admonishingly, "Well, you heard her."

Passepout was affronted. "Imagine her nerve!" the indignant thespian boomed. "I have a good mind to have a word with the owner about her."

"She is the owner," Volo instructed.

"Oh," said the chubby thespian warily. "Do you think I should leave? Or maybe apologize? A few well chosen compliments might go a long way, her being female and all."

"Just let it pass," the master traveler instructed. "Dela is a good sort, with a keen business sense, and no desire to alienate any potential paying customers. You can't ask for more in an innkeeper in these parts."

Passepout nodded, and continued the inhalation of his meal. Volo put his napkin in place, and joined in the dining experience. After a few more mouthfuls, Passepout once again struck up a conversation.

"I only arrived here yesterday," the chubby thespian confessed. "Is there anything I should know about these here parts?"

"Plenty," the master traveler replied. "But first a question: why did you come to Mulmaster to begin with?"

After a swallow and another quaff of ale, the portly thespian

explained.

"Somebody around Westgate told me that there was plenty of room for my sort of trade in the Moonsea area."

"You mean acting, of course," the master traveler clarified.

"Of course," Passepout replied. "I learned my lesson after that little stay in Baldur's Gate, when you last came to my rescue."

"Go on," Volo urged, not wanting to experience another exuberant outbreak of undying gratitude from the chubby actor, nor relive his last jailbreak experience.

"So I said to myself, 'Self, where should we go?' Zhentil Keep was obviously out of the question. I mean, who is willing to pay good money for drama when your city is in ruins."

"Agreed."

"And Hillsfar didn't exactly seem to fit the bill."

"For sure," the master traveler replied, wondering if there was still a price on their heads for impersonating Red Plumes, the city watch, the last time they were there.

"And Phlan already has a resident thespian, Ward T. James."

"Ward T. James?" Volo repeated inquisitively. "Never heard of him."

"He's a big guy, like me," Passepout explained, patting his expansive tummy in illustration. "He tours with a group called the S.S.I.—Stupendous Stagecraft Incorporated. They are most famous for their Pools series of plays that set the great classics of Faerun in a mud pit."

"Great," the master traveler said, quickly taking out a pad and jotting down a few notes. "High drama and mud wrestling all rolled into one."

"So that ruled out Phlan," the actor finished heaping another pile of food onto his plate, to further usher it into his never-filling gullet, "which basically just left Mulmaster as the major metropolis at hand."

Volo swallowed, picked a crumb out of his neatly trimmed beard, took a napkin and wiped his mouth, refilled his mug with ale in case any parchness beset him during his lecture,

and began to fill his boon companion in on Mulmaster minutiae.

"I can understand your reasons for choosing Mulmaster, now that you have explained it to me," the master traveler offered, "but I would still recommend that you pick another place to ply your trade. As far as I'm aware no one ever tells anyone to go to these here parts unless they really never want to see them again."

"I'm sure that's not the case," Passepout protested. "Olive, who recommended this area, was quite fond of me."

"I'm sure," said the master traveler, not wanting to start an argument, "but Mulmaster is known as the City of Danger for a very good reason. If you thought the Red Plumes of Hillsfar were bad, wait 'til you get a load of the Hawks."

"Well, I did last night," the thespian countered. "They weren't too bad as far as a city watch goes."

"No, my friend," Volo corrected. "You were probably taken in by regular soldiers. The Hawks are the High Blade's own storm troopers. Rumor has it that he regularly dispatches them to do his dirty work throughout the Realms. Let me give you a little history.

"Mulmaster was founded—by various influential merchant groups—in the Year of Fell Wizardry, as a trading fortress way station between the Moonsea, the River Lis, and the Dragon Reach. It managed to not only survive, but thrive during the years of unrest, and eventually, in the Year of Thunder, made a bid for complete domination of the Moonsea, only to be put back in its place by the combined forces of Sembia, Hillsfar, Phlan, Melvaunt, and Zhentil Keep."

"Scrappy little place," the thespian commented between mouthfuls.

Volo continued in his recitation of exposition text that he no doubt had already composed for the guidebook in progress.

"There was much finger pointing after their failed attempt at expansionism, and out of the anarchy arose the formation of

a single seat of power, to rule over the others. This leader was to be called the High Blade, who was to work in conjunction with the other ranking nobles who from that time on were known as the Blades. The first High Blade took power in the Year of the Wandering Wyrms, and quickly assassinated any of the Blades who didn't agree with his way of doing things. From that point on the Blades were nothing more than a puppet ruling council."

"Wonderful," the thespian observed, "so that's why he needs those shock troopers around to protect him."

"No, my friend," Volo corrected. "That's the job of the Brotherhood of the Cloak. Any mage in the city of fourth level or higher is immediately recruited to their ranks, or else."

"Or else what?"

Volo made a motion as if he was slitting his throat with the bread knife.

"Oh," said the chubby thespian, beginning to think that maybe leaving town would be a good idea.

"The current High Blade is a fellow by the name of Selfaril Voumdolphin, who succeeded his father into the job after assassinating him. That was back in the Year of the Spear."

"Did he then marry his mother? I seem to recall a play about something like that."

"I'm afraid not," the gazetteer replied. "This is one case where life does not mirror drama. He did recently marry though, to an equally powerful young lady by the name of Dmitra Flas."

"Never heard of her."

"She's also known as the First Princess of Thay, and the Tharchioness of Eltabbar, or just the Tharchioness for short. It was a major diplomatic coup for both Mulmaster and Thay."

"Wonderful."

"She spends most of her time back in Eltabbar, and he's been known to continue to play the rogue with the

wandering eye despite their matrimonial vows. She visits here three times a year. I believe she just arrived yesterday for her most recent visit. Both sides claim that they were wedded due to their mutual respect and love for each other, but I wonder."

"The problem with you, Volo," Passepout said sagely, "is that you are no longer a romantic. If she just arrived back in town yesterday, I bet we won't see hide nor hair of either of them for a while. This is obviously a case of true love winning out despite personal differences in upbringing and breeding. I'll bet they can't wait to see each other."

Volo chuckled at his friend's naivete.

"If you say so, my friend," the gazetteer replied.

"True love conquers all," the thespian spouted.

The master traveler took another quaff of ale, and was instantly reminded of the message he had once read from a Kara Turan fate biscuit that was capable of more believable profundity than his corpulent companion's observation.

Volo thought aloud to himself, "I wonder how the newlyweds are getting along."

Passepout resumed eating.

2

Newlywed Games

In the High Blade's Study in the Tower of the Wyvern:

He was alone in his private study, a room secret to all but his closest advisors (which did not include his wife, the Tharchioness). His robes of silk and fur already smelled of tobacco and musk.

Selfaril Voumdolphin was in deep thought.

The resemblance was striking. It was almost like looking in a mirror. True he had the bearing and build of a weakling, as most wizards did, and his whiskers and his mane were more akin to a hermit's than the well-maintained locks and beard of the High Blade, but in all other respects this young man was the High Blade's perfect twin.

Damn you, father, he thought to himself, cursing his sire.

You were almost the perfect High Blade, always with a secret backup plan to assure your own ascendancy and that of your line. We were alike in many ways. No wonder I had to kill you. Had I not acted fortuitously, you would, no doubt, have discerned my future plans and plotted to replace me with your other son. We are alike in many ways, but I am the better High Blade.

He heard the bookcase that functioned as a secret door move, and assumed that Rickman had returned, as the Hawk commander was the only one other than himself who knew how to work that entrance. He did not bother to turn around. Such things as common courtesy were not required of the High Blade.

"The resemblance was uncanny," Selfaril muttered.

"Yes, your majesty," Rickman agreed. "Donal, that chancre, wasn't lying."

"Imagine his gall," Selfaril said, finally turning to face his one-eyed right-hand man. "First, he betrayed the Retreat and offered the young mage to the agents of my dear bride, and then, not satisfied with the price they offered, he came to us for a better deal."

"For which you were more than willing to comply, sire," the Hawk assented. "They offered him amnesty, we offered him wealth."

"And neither of us planned on keeping our word, anyway. Donal was a fool, and a greedy one at that."

"Agreed, your majesty, but his shortcomings were definitely our advantage."

"Indeed," the High Blade agreed, taking a seat in a chair that had been one of his father's favorites. "Have you taken care of the rest of the loose ends?"

"Yes, sire," the Hawk captain assured. "A company of my best men have just returned from the Retreat. They gained entrance under the pretence of investigating the apparent Thayan raid of the night before. The elders were ever so grateful for a prompt response to the attack, and offered my

men their full cooperation. With their guard down, it was relatively easy for my Hawks to carry out your orders."

"All slaughtered, then?"

"Yes, sire."

The High Blade tapped his forefinger to his temple as if to force out a single drop of thought. "I hope that there weren't too many other secret guests like my father's other heir and rival to my sovereignty. I understand the monastery was also used as an occasional way station for Harper agents, and I have no time to deal with their peskiness at this point."

The Hawk captain quickly dispelled the High Blade's concern. "I took the liberty of instructing one of my men to leave behind the crystal wand that had been used on the Thayan turncoat Donal. It's Thayan design, and the blood of that slug will no doubt focus the possible blame for this little bloodbath on more easterly sources."

"Well done, Rickman," the High Blade complimented. "Take a seat. You have been very busy, and very productive."

The Hawk captain bowed in thanks, and took his place across from the High Blade, adding, "and of course I have seen to the unfortunate demise of our friend the blind wizard smith whose exceptional handiwork adorns the head of our secret guest."

" 'Tis a pity," Selfaril agreed, "but there is no sense in not being careful."

"Agreed," Rickman acknowledged, glad that he was not being perceived as overzealous in his performance of his duties. "So what are your plans for the dispensation of your twin brother, if I might inquire, sire?"

"My twin brother," Selfaril mused. "It's funny. Up until just this moment I never thought of him quite that way. I mean, sure, he has to be my brother, my twin, but as far as I am concerned, he is merely my father's other son, my rival, a challenger to my throne. Tell me Rickman, do you have any brothers?"

"One, your majesty, but he is dead. His name was Jeremy."

"How sad," the High Blade replied in an unsentimental monotone.

"Not really, sire," the Hawk corrected. "As he was the first born, he received all the privileges. That is why I entered the military. It was either there or a monastery."

"Your loss was Mulmaster's gain."

"In more ways than one, sire. When father died, Jeremy inherited it all. In my then capacity as sergeant of the guards, I had him thrown in irons, charged with high treason, and executed a week later. My father's estate was, of course, seized for the state, and I appointed myself as custodian. I was soon promoted, and it was turned over to me as my fiefdom."

"You're not just saying this to earn my favor, are you, Rickman?"

"I wouldn't think of it, sire," the Hawk said proudly. "All you have to do is check the civil records."

"Of course," the High Blade observed in a jesting manner, "one who has already engaged in fratricide would never stoop to falsifying civil records."

"Of course not, your majesty," the Hawk replied, jovially adding, "that would be against the law."

"But of course."

The murderers' conversation was interrupted by the quick sounding of three chimes.

The High Blade cursed.

"It's the Tharchioness, no doubt," Selfaril offered. "I left strict orders with Slater—my valet—to ring me if she inquired of my whereabouts. Word has no doubt already reached her about last night's thwarting of her plans, and she, no doubt, wants to pick my brain about what happened."

"Do you think she suspects that we are behind what happened?"

"No more than I would suspect her of wanting to depose me," the High Blade replied with a grin, coming to his feet.

"Come with me. Let us seek out my still blushing bride, and

let the game of cat and mouse begin!"

* * * * *

In the Tharchioness's Boudoir in the Tower of the Wyvern:

The Tharchioness was not amused.

It was bad enough that she had to endure the damp and smoky gloominess of Mulmaster for yet another one of her thrice-yearly connubial stays, but now to be surrounded by such incompetence was definitely not to her liking, and she had no intention of tolerating it.

She had purposely cut short her stay back in Eltabbar overseeing the rebuilding of her beloved city after the devastating earthquake of a few months back because of the so-called opportunity that had been presented to her ambassador by that traitor to the Thayan cause and the sovereignty of Zulkir Szass Tam, Donal Loomis.

Her just recently executed ambassador with whom the traitor had made contact had been overly optimistic, and had presented his plan as an antidote to the oppressive yoke of matrimony that she had endured for diplomatic reasons with the slimy High Blade of the city to the west.

Szass Tam had explained the necessity of her courtship and marriage to the foul westerner as the first step toward an active Thayan presence in the Moonsea area. The powerful lich lord would then be able to extend his influence farther southward to the Dalelands, while exerting further pressures on the other tharches toward an ultimate goal of the unification of all of Thay under his eternal rule. She had been more than willing to assist him in this ultimate goal, even if it meant subjecting herself to the bondage of matrimony.

Unfortunately, both of them had underestimated the equally acquisitive ambitions of the High Blade, who saw Mulmaster's Tower of the Wyvern as the jumping-off point for his own expansion of power and authority both south and eastward, power which he had no intention of sharing with

his bride, or the real power behind her throne.

The now deceased ambassador had presented such a simple plan. A double for the High Blade existed. Why not abduct him, and persuade him that it would be more advantageous for him to follow orders from them than to die an excruciatingly torturous death at their hands? They would then secretly substitute their puppet for Selfaril; placing him on the throne while the real High Blade was secretly spirited away to the east.

According to Ambassador Vitriole, the traitor who had presented this opportunity was mortally in fear of his life, and as a result, could be trusted to follow their exact orders in exchange for their lifting the sentence of death from his misshapen shoulders (which was immediately agreed to with the full knowledge that a new plan would be carried out on the spot once his usefulness had come to an end).

Donal might have been a traitorous, cowardly fool, the Tharchioness thought to herself, but Vitriole was a fool as well for underestimating his traitorous ways. They deserved each other's company in death. Had I had a competent ambassador in place, I wouldn't be in this delicate position. But no, I had to come to Mulmaster early to face my beloved husband when I displaced him as the ruling power of Mulmaster. Now what am I going to do?

The First Princess of Thay gently applied a bit of perfume behind her ears, knowing that the westerner who was her husband would find it distracting. For a similar reason, she had also chosen to wear her silken robe with the plunging neckline that flattered her ample breasts and drew further attention to her eye-catching cleavage.

I must use everything at my disposal, she thought in agitated resignation, once again cursing the incompetence of her minions that necessitated her sensual theatricality.

Her moments of silent reflection on her current predicament were interrupted by the cautious arrival of her new ambassador to Mulmaster.

"First Princess," the new and fearful ambassador said tentatively, "you requested my presence?"

"No," the Tharchioness replied acidly, "I said that I wanted you at my disposal, here and now. You do know what happened to your predecessor, don't you?"

"Yes, your highness," the ambassador acknowledged, trying not to show that he had just soiled himself out of sheer terror and fear.

The Tharchioness, born Dmitra Flas and now also known as the First Princess of Thay, was legendary in her cruelty, and the execution of Vitriole was only the most recent of her acts of intolerance toward what she considered to be traitorous incompetence. Anything that hindered Szass Tam's ultimate plans was considered to be treasonous within the tharch of Eltabbar, and treason was always punishable by death.

The Tharchioness gave the ambassador a quick once-over. His Mulan lineage was apparent. Rumors of non-Mulan spies in Thay were rampant, and precautions had to be taken. His hairless pate was adorned by the long-since faded tattoos of what once must have been magically-empowered images of phoenixes in flight. Now they were just inked drawings on a wrinkled and pale skull.

Great, she thought to herself, another spineless political appointee who has long since passed his age of usefulness. Why don't they ever send me someone who is young and vibrant rather than another impotent husk of a boot licker?

The Tharchioness looked him in the eyes, dead on.

He dropped to the floor, cringing in an absurd amalgam of abasement and terror.

The Tharchioness rolled her eyes, her contempt turning to cruel amusement, and said, "Well, it doesn't look like you are long for this job, and you know what that means?"

"Yes, your Tharchioness," he managed to get out through trembling lips and chattering teeth.

"Find my husband, corpse maggot, and do it fast," she ordered, revelling in the sheer terror her latest ambassador

felt toward her. "I haven't laid eyes on him since I arrived yesterday."

"Perhaps he is avoiding . . ." the quivering mass offered.

"I don't recall giving you permission to speak, corpse maggot!"

"No, your Tharchioness."

"So don't just cower there, find him!" she screamed, sending him out of the room at a break-neck pace that was, no doubt, largely propelled by complete and utter terror.

The Tharchioness laughed for a moment, her thoughts temporarily diverted from the precarious situation at hand.

"And while you're at it," she said aloud with a grin, though the ambassador had long since left, "clean yourself up. You can't seek the High Blade smelling of excrement. He might mistake you for one of his subjects."

* * * * *

The Reid Room in the Tower of the Wyvern:

The two heads of state met in the receiving room, their entrances carefully orchestrated and timed by their retinues so that neither seemed to have been left waiting for the other.

"Darling," the Tharchioness cooed.

"My Thayan beauty," the High Blade countered, "I was not expecting you for another month."

"I just couldn't stand being away from you," she replied, her cruel lips pursed in fake kisses for the husband she hated.

"That makes two of us," he agreed with just a hint of a leer that the retinues would no doubt mistake for lust, rather than contempt. "How goes the rebuilding of Eltabbar?"

"Slowly."

"Earthquake, wasn't it?"

"Right as always."

During the entire exchange neither the husband nor the wife had come any closer to each other, and still stood on opposite sides of the room. They tentatively drew closer

together, still halting well before they had reached an arm's distance.

He first noticed the scent of a new perfume as they entered the room, while she recognized the foul stench of his tobacco. Their eyes never left each other, like two jungle cats each waiting for the other to be the first to blink, at which point the other would strike a lethal blow.

She's even icier than usual, the High Blade thought. She is probably already aware that her plan has gone awry.

Usually he can't remove his eyes from my breasts, the Tharchioness contemplated. Now he won't break my stare. He knows something and is trying to see if I know it, too. I mustn't give myself away.

The subtle standoff was interrupted by the arrival of some Arabellan Brandy. The High Blade seized

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